



Ravishing REUNION

A trip to Mauritius takes you over Reunion, its closest neighbour; but, somehow it remains virtually unknown to many South Africans. If you happened upon it in a ship, however, it would be harder to miss the soaring peaks of the volcanic island. Banish the thought of typical palm trees and endless white beaches (although there are some) on just another tropical island. While the water's a transparent blue and a few, long reefs provide shelter from violent surf and washing machine currents, there's a strong focus on Reunion's land-based offerings.

"We islanders are said to live with our backs to the sea," says our guide Nicolas Pasquier, as he navigates a windy road inland. "We prefer facing the mountain." And it's obvious why.

At its widest point, the island is only 50km by 70km, while its highest mountain reaches 3 069m (Table Mountain is around 1085m)! A narrow margin along the coast is the most inhabited region and also the area responsible for the island's biggest agricultural product, sugar cane. It's in the interior, however, where the most dramatic landscape lies: shaped by volcanic eruptions, lava flows and the erosion of centuries; magnificent ramparts, wrapped in rainforests, surround tiny

SPRAWLING RESORTS ARE ONE THING YOU WON'T FIND ON REUNION, THE TROPICAL ISLAND JUST FOUR HOURS FROM JOHANNESBURG, REPORTS CLIFFORD ROBERTS.

villages. A superb network of roads weaves up into the seemingly inaccessible corners and outcrops, and even to the rim of the island's youngest volcanic crater.

Sitting on the veranda of the Les Jardins d'Heva hotel one morning, it strikes me that the peaks surrounding the town of Hell-Bourg are a lot like the dorsal fins of some giant pre-historic beast, curled up in slumber. The image fades as I scan our itinerary for the seven days of our stay and get stuck on one in particular: a visit to the rum museum, La Saga du Rhum at the Isautier distillery in St Pierre. The drink is made from molasses, a by product of sugar production, and has a long history on Reunion.

The island has been under the administrative authority of France since its first inhabitants arrived, and explains the very French sounding St Pierres, Isautiers and du Rhums.

Islanders refer to France as "the mainland", and enjoy the trappings of a sturdier economy as a result. Until recently, South Africans needed a Schengen visa to visit – but that's no longer the case. The Euro is the currency used and access to banks, rental companies, a variety of accommodation and other tourist amenities resemble the standard of most European cities.

In addition to the spoken language on the island,

the other links are obvious - there are boulodromes aplenty; supermarket shelves are lined with French wine and pastis; and French-made cars outnumber all others. On the latter, the traffic can be horrendous - but the temperament seems more of the relaxed island-style variety than most South Africans would expect.

I was on the topic of alcohol... One of our stops was Cilaos, a village in a collapsed volcanic crater that is home to Reunion's tiny eight-hectare wine industry. A group of small-scale, but very proud, grape growers deliver their products to a co-operative which bottles and sells the wine on the island, alongside the French and South African wines in stores and restaurants.

There's a stop at Domain du Café Grillé, a four-hectare garden filled with a fantastic collection of exotic and indigenous island plants where we're also introduced to Reunion's premium Bourbon Pointu coffee, which sells for roughly R1 500/kg thanks to its full flavour and very low caffeine content. Most of the island's production is bought by Japan.

Next we encounter La Vanilleraie, a vanilla producer at the Grand Hazier Estate near St Suzanne and learn of their hand-pollinated orchids, a two-year drying and processing period and sample some of the top quality vanilla. Surprisingly only a tiny percentage leaves the island to be used in premier restaurants in Paris.

At the entrance to Piton de la Fournaise (Peak of the Furnace), our guide makes us close our eyes before we proceed. The vehicle edges forward a few metres over a ridge and beyond the dry mountain plants before we're allowed to open them. Below us lies a wasteland, like the surface of Mars. The crater was formed during one of the island's major eruptions centuries ago and is a truly spectacular sight. In the distance, plumes of dust follow cars and cyclists as they move along a single track across its surface.

The last lava flow from the volcano occurred in 2010 – a minor event compared to 2007, when a stretch of the highway to the south of the island was destroyed. At the time, several hectares of land were added to the island, and islanders came out with picnic chairs and packed lunches to watch the progress of the seething mass of molten rock!

In Bébouir Bélouve national park, where we engaged in a popular activity for many locals – trekking around the rainforest – we were even more aware of the magnificent views afforded by the island and even in the rim-flow pool at the luxurious Palm Hotel later, as we drifted about watching the ocean sky burn red before extinguishing, we wondered how the island has remained relatively unknown.

In the morning, at St Anne's Diana Dea Lodge, we woke to find deer munching on the lawn, on a backdrop

of distant, brookie-lace coastline and yet another scene that would otherwise seem too good to be true. A flight with charter company Alpha ULM, served to concretise the thought as we soared over the island ahead of the cloud that sets in around the peaks, like clockwork, every afternoon.

After dinner, our host for the final night at Villa des Cannes in St Marie, Antoine Poletti, brought out a bottle of rum filled with fruit from his uncle's garden and poured us each a tot. As we talked about life on Reunion and his work as a teacher, he summed up our sentiment as he concluded with a smile: "Once, the education department tried to move our family to Paris; but we said 'No! We stay!'" If only we could.

